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Eric Martinez: Maxing out on life

Eric Martinez never really gave his health a second thought, until a simple head cold almost cost him his life.

By Octavio Ramos Jr.

Like most folks, Eric Isidorio Martinez leads a busy lifestyle. When not working for the Maintenance Coordinator Team of the Los Alamos Neutron Science Center Facility Operations (MSS-LFO) group, Martinez stays busy overseeing his ranch and taking care of his children and grandchildren. During the early days of October 2018, Martinez—like many people when summer transitions to autumn—started exhibiting symptoms of a head cold.

“I didn’t really give it any thought,” explains Martinez. “I’d never made my health a priority—there was really never a need to. I started coughing, and at first it bothered me only a little bit. It was made worse because at the time I was out moving cattle from one place to another. It was raining, starting to get cold.”

Ranching is no easy task even on a good day. Without knowing it, Martinez was about to exacerbate his condition even more. “I was breaking in a new horse at the time,” he says, “and he refused cross the river. So, I had to dismount and plod through the river to get him across.”

Pull Quote: “I thought I was in pretty good health. I played and coached football, made significant gains as a powerlifter and had worked as a volunteer firefighter. As I grew older, however, I wasn’t exercising as much, but my diet remained the same as always, with traditional Latino foods like tortillas and beans a mainstay.” —Eric Martinez

Looking back, Martinez now realizes other contributing factors that would make him fight for his life. “I was way overweight,” he says. “I didn’t have a healthy diet, and even though I remained active, I really didn’t exercise much.”

Despite feeling ill, Martinez trudged forward, completing his ranch work and preparing to return to work on a Monday morning. On the following morning, Martinez realized that his condition was continuing to deteriorate rapidly.



Photo Caption: Eric Martinez in 2018 (left) and Eric Martinez in late 2019 (right)—71 pounds lighter and recovered from an illness that almost killed him.

The tipping point

While at work that Tuesday morning, Martinez began coughing more and more. “I couldn’t breathe,” he says with a frown. “I had to tell my boss I needed to go home and get some rest. I started driving down the hill and just had to pull over—I was blacking out because of this terrible cough. I made it to Española, where I decided to go to urgent care. They found I had a respiratory infection and they prescribed an antibiotic.”

Martinez stayed home and took his medication, but the infection progressed even further. “My father found me that Sunday,” he recalls. “My skin was gray, my lips were blue. I don’t remember much about that day at all.”

Pull Quote: “I had double pneumonia, and I almost passed away on October 14, 2018. My oxygen saturation was in the low 70s—the doctors couldn’t believe I was still breathing.” —Eric Martinez

Martinez was hospitalized and underwent a battery of tests. X-rays revealed that his lungs were saturated with phlegm—it was so pronounced that it was leaking into other tissue. Five days into his hospitalization, Martinez began to experience a slow but steady recovery. Although he was later discharged from the hospital, he went home on oxygen and was prescribed a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machine to help him breathe while sleeping.

“That winter, I went to the hospital once every week for medical evaluation and to have tests done,” says Martinez. “I was able to return to work in February, and that’s when I knew that I had to make a change when it came to my health. Up to that point, I had been working every day just to stay alive.”



Photo Caption: Jonathan Loibl (left) guides Eric Vigil through a basic exercise designed to improve his overall health and wellness.

The road to recovery

Upon being cleared by the Laboratory’s Occupational Medicine group to return to work, Martinez met with Medical Director Sara Pasqualoni. To kick-start Martinez’s recovery,

Pasqualoni advised Martinez to work with Jonathan Scott Loibl of the Occupational Health (OSH-OH) group to improve his overall health and fitness.

“Jonathan did not have an opening for me until April 2019, but right away he took the time to meet with me,” says Martinez. “He outlined a preliminary plan for me, one that would help prepare me for the rigorous six-month program that I would start in April 2019.”

As a health service coordinator, Loibl offers services to all Laboratory employees related to promoting health and fitness. These services are free of charge but require that an employee “put in the work” to improve their overall health and fitness.

Pull Quote: “There’s one vivid moment I remember when I first met with Eric. He sat across from me, an oxygen concentrator hanging from his neck, and he looked defeated. Eric knew he needed a change, but he did not know how to start. I told him I could get him where he needed to be, but that he needed to comply with my advice.” —Jonathan Loibl

Martinez started his recovery by walking every day. Little by little, he tackled other challenges, like walking up short inclines and pushing his distance further out by the day.

“There were times when I was gasping or coughing, but I kept pushing myself,” says Martinez. “At first I did not want to buy what Jonathan was selling me, but I soon realized that these first simple efforts were actually working. That’s when I bought in and that’s when I started to feel better at last.”

Because progression was slow, Martinez did not really notice the changes taking place in his body. It wasn’t until other people commented on his different physique that Martinez acknowledged the transformation.

“Through Jonathan’s teachings, I have learned that health and fitness are daily things,” Martinez explains. “Jonathan opened my eyes to see that my health and fitness benefits other people in my life, from my girlfriend and friends to my sons, daughters and grandchildren.”

As of October 6, 2019, Martinez has dropped 71 pounds. His blood pressure and resting heart rate are close to normal and his lung-capacity test showed no abnormalities.

Having survived his medical crisis, Martinez says that he wants people to know about and take advantage of all the services the Laboratory makes available to its employees. “I am so grateful that I work here,” Martinez affirms. “This place has so many services available to employees, and I’ve taken my bits and pieces to become a healthier person. Every one of us here has a mission as part of the Laboratory, and I am now a productive member of this workforce, thanks to people like Dr. Pasqualoni and Jonathan Loibl. Please take advantage of these services—I bought into it and now I have the skills to be healthy and fit on my own.”

“My role is to provide you with the tools to build a house, not build it for you,” says Loibl on his approach to teaching health and fitness. “It’s never too late to make a lifestyle change; you just

have to be committed to yourself. The tools for better health and fitness are always available—I am ready for you to come and take advantage of them.”

“I now live my life to the max,” says Martinez. “I call it maxing out. Jonathan now has me jogging, something I haven’t done in years. Yeah, every day I am maxing out my heath, which helps me max out on life.”



Photo Caption: Eric Martinez (right) recently completed Jonathan Loible’s program designed to teach him the basics of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Resources

Occupational Medicine: <https://int.lanl.gov/employees/health-wellness/occupational-medicine/index.shtml>

Occupational Health: <https://int.lanl.gov/org/ddops/aladeshqss/occupational-safety-and-health/occupational-health/index.shtml>

Wellness Center: <https://int.lanl.gov/employees/health-wellness/wellness/wellness-center/index.shtml>